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The Madison Group

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Dec. 3 — On Jan. 4 of this year, a dozen men gathered in Room 607 of the Madison Hotel in Washington, D.C., to see what they could do to oust soft-liners from power.

Most were about 35 years old; all were hawks in foreign policy and defense fields; all were present or former Congressional staffers; all had security clearances of top secret or higher.

For students of Washington's underground "power ronde," where old-boy networks are replaced by new-boy networks, which in turn are ousted by newer-boy networks, the bipartisan Madison Group — which met every other Friday for lunch to devise ways to bedevil, embarrass and defeat the doves in high places — offers a fascinating case study.

The organizer was John Carbaugh, who had been press aide to Strom Thurmond, earned a law degree, and has served Jesse Helms since 1974. Carbaugh had helped orchestrate the blocking of SALT II ratification in 1979; he formed the Institute of American Relations, a tax-exempt foundation that netted a half-million dollars to finance a newsletter and later publish a book, "A Program for Military Independence"; it also paid for lunches and trips for the Madison Group.

Among the early members were Sven Kraemer, (Senator Tower's staff), Quentin Crommelin Jr. (Thurmond), Tidal McCoy (Garn), Richard Perle (ex-Jackson), William Schneider (Representative Kemp), Michel Pillsbury (Senate Steering), David Sullivan (Senator Gordon Humphrey), Jack Davis (Stone), Robert Andrews (Glenn), Mark Schneider (Garn), Angelo Cordevilla (Wallop), Margo Carlisle (McClure). The "outsider" was Charles Kupperman, of the Committee on the Present Danger, who later became informal liaison with Ronald Reagan's Richard Allen.

The Madison Group was loose, inchoate, but effective in drawing issues — burying SALT II, challenging aid to Nicaragua's leftists, and above all increasing the defense budget. At the same time, some members excelled in channeling otherwise unobtainable information about U.S. weaknesses to

imitated and countered the manipulation of its mirror-image in the Administration — the group of doves that John Carbaugh likes to call "the Mondale mafia."

Most of the time, the Madison Group operated as a separate locus of power, with the staffers' senators not fully knowing (or wanting to know) what their employees were doing. Thus, Carbaugh's operation can be viewed as (1) a cabal of ambitious, unsupervised ideologues out to grab power, or (2) a patriotic task force drawn together by a great issue — the dangerous drift of American security.

"We stole the doves' idea," explains Carbaugh today. In the 1976 interregnum, accommodationists shrewdly helped each other into second-level positions of policy formulation and operational influence. As a result, the dovish mindsets of William Miller, Richard Moose, David Aaron, Anthony Lake, David McGiffert, Roger Molander and Marshall Schulman reinforced one another and determined the Carter Administration's foreign-defense course, easily turning aside the half-hearted hawkishness of a Brzezinski.

Today, the Madison Group seeks to follow that example. The Reagan Defense transition team is staffed by Carbaugh, Kraemer, McCoy, Perle and Bill Schneider; the Reagan Arms Control team has Pillsbury and Sullivan; the Reagan State Department team has Carbaugh and Perle, and the C.I.A. team has Cordevilla and Mark Schneider. The Group is "in."

The Mondale set is still fighting — Bill Miller of the Senate Intelligence Committee staff was able to get Barry Goldwater to fire a couple of the best Madison groupies, who were promptly rehired after the intercession of other members' senators.

Now that they're triumphant, will the Madison Group cling together in power as well as those derided as the "Mondale mafia"? Probably not: power's bells are breaking up that old gang of mine.

Carbaugh and Pillsbury are frowning at each other on the issue of loyalty to Richard Allen; pro-Haig and anti-Haig lines are already being drawn; the outgoing network is seeding the media with horrific tales of the "cabal," and some associates of Group members are still in such a leaky habit that The New York Times has been receiving copies of all transition memos even before the Reagan him-muckey-mucks do.

Despite these cracks in what used to be a united front, the Madison Group — that newest-boy-network, plus Margo — will slot itself into the niche now occupied by its ideological adversary. That's healthy; when the voters speak, the bureaucracy should respond.

The power ronde never ends. Even as I write, some of the more ambitious doves are thinking of forming a group to get out the truth about what the

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